

## **Immigration Essay: Chinese Heritage School**

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The Chinese Heritage School in Champaign-Urbana, established in the 1970s, supports the local Asian community by teaching Chinese to youths, reminding them of their heritage, and spreading Chinese culture in American society.

Chinese Heritage School teaches Chinese youths the Chinese language through interesting methods. It teaches Chinese to students step by step, because most are learning Chinese as second language. It is hard, since Chinese differs so much from their native language, English. For example, individual characters in Chinese are not simple and few as the 26 of them in English, requiring only 1 or 2 strokes to write. Some Chinese characters require 10 or even more strokes, and there were a total of 50,000 or more characters in the Chinese language before simplification, although only 3000 to 4000 characters are needed to achieve literacy. However, the task of memorizing 3000 to 4000 different characters seems daunting and discouraging to any student with Chinese as their second language.

The basic concepts of Chinese differ much from English. For example, there are no conjugations, no singular or plural forms, no tenses, no voices, etc. Chinese grammar relies on syntax and sentence structures to express grammatical differences. Therefore, the teachers have to make a connection between Chinese and English in the student's mind.

According to a former student at Chinese Heritage School, the education process starts with Pinyin first, because it is the closest thing to English. Pinyin is phonetic and is

made up of the English alphabet. Pinyin tells the readers how to pronounce a character. Reading them is the same thing as hearing someone speak Chinese. There are only a few hundred possible combinations of them, but each combination of Pinyin can mean several different words. The students move onto proper pronunciation of Chinese through Pinyin. After that, the students learn to connect Pinyin to individual Chinese characters. Pinyin is offered as a supplement along the side of Chinese characters to help students identify the meaning of the words. From there, the teachers move onto reading long passages of Chinese, first with Pinyin aid, then without. Thus the students will learn to write Chinese characters; writing is the most challenging part of the Chinese language.

The teaching materials at the school are diverse. The school has amassed almost a thousand different materials, which include videos, books, and tapes, even though the school is not funded in any way other than donations. These materials are from Jinan University in China or organizations throughout U.S. or China supporting their cause. The teachers at Chinese Heritage School also translate songs into Chinese or play Chinese movies to teach, since the students are easily bored with tough memorization and lectures.

Even so, with all these attempts to make Chinese learning more interesting, some Chinese students, especially ones forced by their parents to learn the Chinese language, are sometimes not motivated to learn an entirely different curriculum along with their American one. They feel there is not much use for Chinese in U.S. Heavy loads of homework also discourage them from spending much time on Chinese, as does involvement in sports and clubs.

Despite the problematic student attitudes, teachers and parents feel that Chinese Heritage School reinstates the sense of Chinese heritage pride within Chinese youths. Teaching the language itself is basically teaching the Chinese culture. For example, Chinese culture praises the quality of hard work and discipline in a person, as both are needed to learn the Chinese language. Learning Chinese requires restraint from distraction and enduring perseverance at the task over a long time to memorize thousands of characters, and various characters that exist in Chinese do not have a parallel in English, therefore showing the cultural differences.

Teaching the language gives the Chinese youths the ability to communicate with other Chinese people who only speak and read Chinese. Younger generations of Chinese Americans are glad to converse with their relatives on their visits to China. The students therefore can learn more about China and their own culture, and also identify themselves as individuals. The language also allows them to read ancient Chinese books if they are willing to take the time. These writings contain many old Chinese philosophies and social values.

Chinese Heritage School spreads the knowledge about China to other races. Chinese Heritage School not only teaches Chinese Americans but also Americans who have a fascination with Chinese culture or language. This school accepts Americans who wish to learn Chinese but are unable to enroll in a Chinese language class at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign. Teaching of the language spreads the culture of China. Teaching and sharing of culture can lessen culture shock and allow more equality through mutual understanding. [From ERIC Digest, "Chinese Heritage Community Language Schools in the United States", <[www.ericdigests.org/1998-](http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-)

1/chinese.htm> (Sept, 9. 2007); Jerry Norman, AskAsia.org, "Chinese Writing: Transitions and Transformations."

<[www.askasia.org/teachers/essays/essay.php?no=101](http://www.askasia.org/teachers/essays/essay.php?no=101)> (Oct. 10, 2005); Student historian's e-mail interview with Gordon Ruan, Sept. 8, 2007; and Mabel C. Thurmon "Dose of Culture - Chinese Heritage School Offers a Chance to Learn Language and Culture." News-Gazette [Champaign-Urbana] 30 Jan. 2003. Access World News. NewsBank. UIUC Lib. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy2.library.uiuc.edu/iw-search/we/InfoWeb>> (Aug. 28, 2007.)